

Lakeland City Commissioner Don Selvage Statement  
September 29, 2013

For the past six months we have endured a series of disturbing events that occurred within the Lakeland Police Department and other departments of the city. Those of us in leadership positions, elected and appointed, have struggled with how to deal with these challenges. I believe we all have tried to reach a balance between honoring due process and holding accountable those guilty of inappropriate and/or illegal behavior.

These events have played out in public with no shortage of opinions from various groups and individuals. All of us on the city commission have received an abundance of advice from our constituents and other interested parties. For the most part, this counsel has been passionate and well-meaning, offering insights from a wide spectrum of viewpoints. Like my fellow commissioners, I have taken all of these viewpoints into account in forming my stance on how to proceed.

The city manager and the mayor have shown exceptional professionalism in responding to events with measured and deliberate actions. They have also shown admirable loyalty to the men and women of the Lakeland Police Department. I have, however, taken issue with some of the decisions by the mayor and city manager. Early on, I recommended including the state attorney and county sheriff in our assessment of the police department; in my view the city's response has been too often defensive and insular.

I am disappointed in our local state delegates who have been quick to offer opinions, sometimes exhibiting a lack of knowledge of the Police Officers Bill of Rights, which is state law. Not once did any of us in city leadership receive a phone call or letter offering to help. Their suggestions have all reached us primarily through the press and facebook.

State Attorney Hill has pulled no punches in his assessment of the Lakeland Police Department, yet he too has allowed his personal feelings to spill over into the debate. His recent public derisive and dismissive comments about the Police Advisory Committee were uncalled for. These are citizens who volunteered to help in a tough situation and they deserve our support and respect.

We should not, however, blame others for the crisis we face. These are real problems that were brought on by a long-term failure of leadership at the Lakeland Police Department. Mr. Hill performed his public duty by bringing these issues to light and I commend him for his tenacity in demanding corrective action. Likewise, The Ledger and other media have done their jobs in keeping the pressure on. It is up to all of us in leadership positions to respond accordingly and fix the problems.

I believe that Chief Lisa Womack has done a good job in addressing the issues of accreditation and training in the Lakeland Police Department. She has put in place the necessary policies and procedures to ensure that the citizens of this city get the law enforcement protection they deserve.

Despite these efforts, there are lingering questions about the culture at LPD. Incidents continue to surface of ranking officers choosing loyalty to colleagues over their sworn duty to uphold the law, the most recent coming to light last week with the arrest of an officer accused of sexual battery. The 9-1-1 response to a call from the alleged victim was shocking. I would hope that a call from a citizen complaining of a police officer doing something wrong would receive the highest priority in our emergency call room, raising a red flag and a supervisor being informed immediately. Instead, the response by the dispatcher was dismissive and the subsequent investigation by a sergeant into the matter was cursory at best.

For me, this incident was the last straw. The department has been under siege for months as new incidents surface on an almost weekly basis. We need strong leadership to change the culture at LPD and I have lost confidence in Chief Womack's ability to provide that leadership.

